



BIRDING BOSTON: THE COMMON TO THE FENS

by Kenneth Hudson

My purpose in this article is twofold: to document the surprising wealth of birdlife found close to downtown Boston and to prompt readers to visit the city and enjoy its natural attractions. In order to encourage readers to use public transportation, I describe how to reach all the locations mentioned in this article by the MBTA Red or Green lines or buses.

Boston Common

Get off at the MBTA Park Street station (Green or Red lines) or the Boylston Street station (Green Line). Let us begin at Boston Common. The oldest public park in the United States offers more to the discerning birder than mere pigeons. But please do not disdain the humble Rock Dove; it is the preferred prey of the Red-tailed Hawks that regularly patrol the Common and other urban parks in winter.

Starlings commonly mob soaring Red-tailed Hawks, a convenient behavioral trait for the birder. A large flock of starlings wheeling to and fro is more easily noticed than one drab buteo, however big, sluggishly circling high overhead. I have also seen Ring-billed Gulls repeatedly swooping at Redtails in flight. Do not be surprised if most of the Red-tailed Hawks you find in town have a brownish-gray tail: adults seem to be in the minority locally. Although this is not the only raptor found at the Common, it is the one most likely to be noticed by the general public. In 1991 and 1992 a pair of these birds nested at Franklin Park, only a few miles from downtown Boston.

Smaller in size but vastly more abundant is the Ring-billed Gull, a prominent denizen of the Common and the adjacent Public Garden for much of the year. When I first visited Boston in the early 1950s, there were very few gulls in the parks and virtually none of them were Ringbills. But relatively recent range expansion has drastically altered the complexion of urban birding. Almost as tame as pigeons and squirrels, Ring-billed Gulls will crowd closely around anyone dispensing edible largesse and loudly demand their share. Should this dubious honor befall you, pull out your copy of *A Field Guide to Advanced Birding*, and find the illustration showing successive stages in the plumage of the maturing Ring-billed Gull. Compare the drawings in the book with the flesh-and-feather reality of the fowl raising hell at your feet. If the ground is damp and the season other than winter, watch them pause every few steps to gobble earthworms.

On a sunny spring afternoon on the Common, few objects stand out more prominently than a Ring-billed Gull in gleaming adult plumage. But on an overcast winter day after snow flurries have dusted the sere grass, that same gull

(now in less pristine garb) will be almost invisible. More than once I have found myself standing right in the middle of a flock of these birds without having been aware of them until one gull suddenly moved or cried.

Due to the dearth of bushes and shrubs on Boston Common, small landbirds tend to be scarce except during peak migration periods. At such times you should check out the burying ground along Boylston Street. (Note: at the time of writing this place is closed to the public. Be content with surveying it from outside the wrought-iron fence. You will not miss much.) This and other burying grounds in the downtown area are good places to find Eastern Phoebes and thrushes. They will often perch on the gravestones where you can get a good look at them. Dark-eyed Juncos and several kinds of sparrows also turn up at the appropriate seasons, but they are more easily viewed along the chainlink fence surrounding the nearby ballfields. Presumably they are attracted by the seeds of various herbaceous plants that grow by the fence. Yellow-shafted Flickers pause during migration to feed on ants on the ballfields.

When the year's first crop of dandelions has flowered and is just beginning to set seed, notice the House Finches gorging themselves among the fading blooms. This species, a relative newcomer to Boston, is one of the first birds to resume song after the winter solstice. Some are already tuning up before the end of January. House Finches are now well entrenched in our urban habitat. You can find them almost everywhere from the financial district to the remoter public parks and residential neighborhoods. Not bad for a transplanted Westerner that never naturally occurred east of the Rockies! If I had the time, I would very much like to do a careful nesting census of this species within some manageable area of the city. This would be a worthwhile project for an interested amateur looking for something to do next spring.

Public Garden

The Public Garden is adjacent to the Common. Get off at the MBTA Arlington station (Green Line). Crossing Charles Street, we come next to the Public Garden. Unlike the Common, the Public Garden is blessed with enough shrubs (including evergreens) to attract a fairly wide array of birds. It also boasts that other *sine qua non* of good birding, plenty of water. This tends, alas, to freeze solid in winter. Many sharp-eyed locals are unaware of the surprises afforded by the Garden. For instance, not too many years ago a pair of Northern Orioles built a nest in one of the huge elms that make this park so lovely. A Northern Mockingbird has been resident for several years, but only drew general notice when it started singing and found a mate in 1992. The pair subsequently behaved as if they were nesting in the park, although I was not able to locate the nest or fledged young.

It is not unheard of to find a stray Red-winged Blackbird or Song Sparrow at the Garden in the breeding season. I would like to believe that they nest here,

but they are more likely nonbreeding stragglers from the nearby Charles River Esplanade. Several pairs of American Robins nest in the Public Garden and in the Common every year. Common Grackles are strongly suspected of doing likewise. On two occasions I have found Downy Woodpeckers nesting here, and in 1992 Mourning Dove was added to the short list of known nesters.

Chimney Swifts, often seen chasing insects or drinking on the wing from the lagoon, are presumed to nest not far from this park. Swallows present a puzzle; at least three species (Tree, Barn, and Rough-winged) occur at the Garden in May. This is only to be expected. However, they are also liable to turn up at almost any time in June. I do not know what to conclude from this, except of course that "more study is needed."

In spring, when terns are migrating northward along the coast, the alert and lucky birder could spot one circling the lagoon at the Public Garden. On one or two occasions I have seen a tern actually dive into the water, which (believe it or not) has fish. More frequently noted are Black-crowned Night Herons, often heard squawking overhead and sometimes observed roosting in a tree or standing at the water's edge. In recent years visits by Double-crested Cormorants have become increasingly frequent. I have photographed these birds catching hornpout here in the Garden.

Fish have already been mentioned in passing. Although sunfish, goldfish, and hornpout are found in the lagoon, nobody knows exactly how they got there or where they came from. Since the water is drained twice a year for routine maintenance, it is doubtful that self-sustaining breeding populations have become established. Ergo, either someone is deliberately reintroducing them year after year, or they are finding their own way in via some underground connection with the Charles River.

In any case, despite the fish and some aquatic insects, the lagoon does not regularly attract the smaller wading birds. Once in a while when the water has been drained, a migrating Killdeer might drop in, and Spotted Sandpiper must be a twice-yearly visitor in very small numbers. Mallards and Black Ducks almost exhaust the list of dabbling ducks at the Public Garden, although Green-winged Teal, Wood Duck, and American Widgeon have been found a few times (usually in autumn).

The many trees and bushes throughout the Garden attract an array of warblers, vireos, flycatchers, thrushes, finches, and other migrants in spring and fall. In years when Cedar Waxwings are abundant, there might be a flock of them lipping and flycatching at the Garden for several weeks at a stretch in late summer and early autumn. Yellow-bellied Sapsucker shows up every year during migration. This silent unobtrusive species is easy to overlook in fall, but in April you can probably find it by keeping an eye on a certain birch tree in the northeastern quadrant of the park, not too far from the Parks Department shed. One of the magnolias in the northwestern quadrant is positively covered with

hundreds of sapsucker holes. As spring draws to a close after the May warbler waves, the Public Garden is a good place to find tardy stragglers among the usual late-season migrants: Eastern Wood-Pewee, Great Crested Flycatcher, Swainson's Thrush, American Redstart, Common Yellowthroat, and one or two others are among the birds heard almost until mid-June.

Commonwealth Avenue Mall

The Commonwealth Avenue Mall is adjacent to the Public Garden. Get off at the MBTA Arlington station (Green Line), walk two blocks north on Arlington Street. To get good afternoon light, start at the MBTA Kenmore station (Green Line): the Mall is just east of Kenmore station. Continuing westward, we leave the Public Garden and stroll along the Commonwealth Avenue Mall, which bisects the residential core of Back Bay. At first glance, and perhaps for some time thereafter, this beautiful but nonetheless very urban neighborhood would seem unlikely to support much birdlife. But appearances can be deceptive. For instance, the House Finch thrives here, and ivy growing on the sides of brick buildings affords it many suitable nesting sites. There are also Blue Jays, American Crows, and American Robins. The former is presumed to nest in the neighborhood, while the latter two are known to do so. In 1991 and again in 1992 two pairs of crows nested in elms on the Mall. American Kestrel nests in cavities under the eaves of residential buildings and can also be found in winter. As with many other year-round species, it is hard to say whether the individuals that breed here are the same ones that spend the winter. Common Nighthawks are believed to breed on flat graveled roofs in Back Bay. Their nasal cries on summer evenings are as characteristic of the city as the chirping of House Sparrows in daylight.

During migrations it is possible to find the occasional American Woodcock under the trees on the Mall, probably drawn there by the abundant earthworms. One winter I found a Song Sparrow singing in the shrubbery of a front yard facing the Mall. Also in winter it can be worthwhile to scan the sky for Red-tailed Hawks commuting between the Common and the more outlying parks. On several occasions a Merlin has been seen perched in a tree or on a rooftop television antenna here in the heart of Back Bay. (The reader is urged, between late autumn and early May, to take a second look at any "aberrant kestrel" found hereabouts.) Other raptors seen over Back Bay in recent years include Turkey Vulture, Osprey, Bald Eagle, Northern Harrier, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Broad-winged Hawk, and Peregrine Falcon. As Paul Roberts stated a number of years ago, "Hawks are where you find them" [Roberts, P. 1977. Where to Watch Hawks in Massachusetts, *Bird Observer* 5(4):109].

I would not wish to give the impression that Back Bay is another Drumlin Farm or Plum Island, because obviously it is not. But neither is it the Sahara Desert. There is always something to see and think about. In my book, birding is

not so much a matter of what a particular locale has to offer. Rather it hinges on what the birder brings to that locale. Experience, perceptivity, curiosity, originality, and being alive to the possibilities are the essential ingredients. There will be some days when you will not see many species in Back Bay. But you never need to feel bored. When you reach the point at which "What is that bird?" begins to pall, ask instead, "What is it doing? And how and why? What does it mean?" Pretty soon you will not have time to read articles such as this one; you will be too busy writing your own.

Charles River Esplanade

From the Public Garden cross Beacon Street at Arlington Street, turn north, and the pedestrian overpass leading to the Esplanade is a few paces in front of you. From the MBTA Charles/Mass General Hospital station (Red Line) take two elevated pedestrian ramps just south of the station. From the MBTA Auditorium station (Green Line) take the Harvard Square bus three short blocks north to Beacon Street, walk a few paces to the bridge, and take the ramp down to the Esplanade. Or skip the bus and just walk from the station. It only takes five minutes. There are also two pedestrian ramps linking the Esplanade with the alley between Beacon Street and Storrow Drive. These are convenient if for any reason you wish to shorten your hike. After sauntering along Back Bay's charming residential streets, we turn north to try our luck at the Charles River Esplanade. It is a refreshing change of pace. First, however, a word of warning: beware of joggers! Hordes of them are always galloping along the Esplanade. Indeed, there is no longer a footpath or public sidewalk anywhere in or near Back Bay that has not been overrun by joggers, skateboarders, rollerbladers, and the like. You are more likely to be knocked down by one of these folks than robbed by a mugger. The authorities, needless to say, do not give a hoot. In this sense, Boston is a hostile town for birders. And it is positively dangerous for many senior citizens and the physically challenged.

Aside from that, birding the Esplanade can be most uncomfortable in midwinter when gale-force winds, howling unobstructed across a vast expanse of ice, hurl stinging clouds of powdery snow crystals into your eyes. But if there is any open water, be sure to check for diving ducks. Over the past twenty years I have recorded many of the common species. One year it will be mostly Common Goldeneyes, another year Buffleheads, the next year scaup and Ring-necked Ducks. Recently, Red-breasted and Hooded mergansers have been fairly regular. Be on the lookout too for Double-crested Cormorant. Although usually thought of as a summer resident, this bird does winter locally in small numbers.

In fall and spring Horned or Pied-billed grebe might sometimes be seen. Once in a great while a Northern Shoveler or Gadwall or some other interesting surface-feeding duck may be found, but unless you carefully study each flock of Mallards and American Black Ducks, you will overlook the infrequent visitors.

It is also very easy to miss hybrids, the natural tendency being to dismiss the duller-looking ones as Mallards. So make a conscious effort to slow down and really look at these birds. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred the questionable individual will indeed prove to be a Mallard; the hundredth time it will surprise you.

A few Common Terns have appeared at the Esplanade, mostly in late summer. Keep an eye peeled for them and listen for their cries. You will also find Double-crested Cormorants and Black-crowned Night Herons fishing here, the spring shad run drawing rather surprising numbers of them, up to a hundred and forty cormorants at the end of May or in early June.

Red-winged Blackbird, Gray Catbird, and Song Sparrow probably nest at the Esplanade. At least one pair of Cedar Waxwings attempted to nest near the Hatch Shell in 1992, and Eastern Kingbirds were discovered nesting in the same area several years earlier, remarkably far intown for a traditionally rural species to breed. Various other small landbirds can be found during migration and in winter. The Otis Grove, halfway between Community Boating and the Massachusetts Avenue bridge, is a good place to look for them. One of my most memorable days at the Esplanade was in winter; a pair of Snow Buntings materialized out of thin air and settled in a small bare shoreline tree. It is hard to say whether I was more surprised by their mere presence there at the edge of Back Bay, or by the fact that they perched in the tree instead of alighting on the ground.



Mourning Dove on nest in the Fens.

Photo by Kenneth Hudson

Much more could be said about the Esplanade but we still have a lot of ground to cover, and we must move right along. Let us make a quick detour through Charlesgate before proceeding to the Fens for the grand finale.

Charlesgate

Follow the Commonwealth Avenue Mall one block west from Massachusetts Avenue, or from the MBTA Kenmore station (Green Line), walk one block east. Situated between Massachusetts Avenue and Kenmore Square, Charlesgate consists of a short stretch of smelly stream (much of it mercifully hidden by the streets beneath which it flows) bordered by sickly pine trees and deteriorating brick walkways. The latter are often liberally strewn with old soggy newspapers and magazines. Broken glass from discarded liquor bottles lends a touch of—er—distinction to the general ambiance of decay and neglect. This already charmless panorama is further blighted by a big, ugly, heavily used elevated traffic ramp running directly overhead. A textbook case of mismanaged parkland, Charlesgate nevertheless merits your consideration because of the birds that (in a mind-numbing display of poor taste) continue to appear there year after year.

Dark-eyed Juncos and White-throated Sparrows vie with the two species of kinglets for the Most Numerous Regular Migrant prize. Hermit Thrush and Brown Creeper show up reliably every year. A number of warblers and other small landbirds can be found with minimal effort at the proper seasons. Downy Woodpecker, Black-capped Chickadee, Tufted Titmouse, and Mourning Dove might turn up at any time. American Robin and Cedar Waxwing have nested here. For such an eyesore, Charlesgate affords much of interest to the naturalist.

The Fens

From Charlesgate walk one block south, being careful of traffic when crossing streets. If the narrow sidewalks are unplowed in winter, start at the MBTA Auditorium station (Green Line), walk a few steps south to Boylston Street, turn west, and walk two and a half short blocks to the Fens. The bizarre paradox of Charlesgate now safely behind us, we trudge up the sloping traffic ramp and pass over the turnpike extension and railroad tracks to fetch up at last in the Fens. A hundred-odd years ago the local topography and corresponding neighborhood nomenclature differed considerably from what we find today. At that time the Fens was indeed part of what people knew as "Back Bay." Since then, however, things have changed. Now the Fens is considered to be in the Fenway. Nonetheless, the tradition has persisted on most street maps of labeling this park the "Back Bay Fens." In order to avoid confusing the reader, I shall call the place simply "the Fens."

The reader is advised to keep two things in mind concerning the Fens: (1) it is a fine place to bird, and (2) it would be exceedingly unwise to venture into the

*BIRDS OF
THE FENS*



Green-backed Heron



Double-crested Cormorant



Black-crowned Night Heron

Photos by Kenneth Hudson

park alone at night. (Most of Boston's public parks are officially closed between 11:30 P.M. and 6:00 A.M. except for walk-through traffic.) In broad daylight the Fens is about as safe as anyplace else in town. Rule of thumb: if you see gardeners working in their plots when you arrive, it should be safe for birding. If the park is deserted (and dark), think twice.

If possible, begin your study of the Fens in February. It is quiet then, and you will not feel overwhelmed by an abundance of subject matter clamoring for your attention. Among the Mallards and Black Ducks on the stream are usually Hooded Mergansers in flocks numbering from half a dozen to twenty. It would be hard to imagine anyone who could behold a drake Hooded Merganser in crisp breeding plumage without experiencing a frisson of esthetic delight. Listen for their peculiar ventriloquial growl or purr, an incongruously colorless voice for such a handsome little fowl. Bufflehead, American Wigeon, Gadwall, Northern Shoveler, and Red-breasted Merganser are also possibilities, but you will not find all of them on any given day, or even every year. In spring and fall, if you visit frequently, you can also see Pied-billed Grebe, American Coot, Wood Duck, and Green-winged Teal. In winter I have found as many as six Double-crested Cormorants at the Fens, depending on availability of open water.

Check the tall phragmites reeds lining the streambanks for Great Blue Heron and Black-crowned Night Heron. Both species often winter here. The reeds provide shelter and food for many other species, too. Since most of these birds are rather small, they have to be looked for with some care.

If you arrive at the Fens just after dawn on a mid- or late-winter morning, you will find up to a hundred robins flying out of the reeds, generally in a westward or southerly direction, heading for their daytime feeding areas. Do not be fooled by the flocks of starlings apparently doing the same. Most of these birds are actually coming from downtown night roosts. For some reason best known to themselves, they fly at very low altitudes just skimming the tops of the reedbeds at the Fens. This gives the illusion that they are flying up from within the reeds, an illusion that is especially convincing for an observer stationed south of the Victory Gardens. Shift your position to the Boylston Street bridge, just north of the Victory Gardens, and you can see the starlings coming over the roofs from the east.

Several sparrow species take to the phragmites in winter and during migration. I have even seen Downy Woodpeckers assiduously hacking away at dead reedstalks. A complete list of birds found in these reeds would run to dozens of species.

In the breeding season Tree and Rough-winged swallows nest at the Fens, as does Warbling Vireo. This is thought to be the closest to downtown Boston that these three species have regularly nested in recent decades. Other nesting birds at the Fens include Gray Catbird, Northern Mockingbird, American Robin, Red-winged Blackbird, Northern Oriole, Eastern Kingbird, Mourning Dove,

House Finch, Downy Woodpecker, Cedar Waxwing, and Song Sparrow. The Song Sparrow is known to be victimized by the Brown-headed Cowbird at the Fens; it is possible that other species are also parasitized. Northern Cardinal and American Kestrel are believed to nest close to the Fens, the former possibly within the park itself.

Across the stream from the Agassiz Road bridge, near the War Memorials, is a shallow muddy area thickly covered with cattails. Check this spot carefully from spring through autumn. Not only do Red-winged Blackbirds nest in the cattails; various waders, large and small, frequent the surrounding mudflat. Among the birds I have found here are Killdeer, Semipalmated, Least, Spotted, and Solitary sandpipers, Lesser Yellowlegs, dowitcher species, Sora, Green-backed Heron, and Great Egret.

Rarities occur just often enough to add spice to the local birding without turning the Fens into a four-star tourist attraction. For several years in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Orchard Oriole turned up every spring. In 1986 a pair nested less than a mile from here, at the Riverway. One recent autumn I secured some fine photos of the notoriously hard-to-photograph Lincoln's Sparrow at the Victory Gardens. Two White-throated Sparrows spent the summer of 1991 at the Fens. That same year I noticed a pair of Osprey soaring overhead on July fourth, a decidedly unusual date for this species in Boston. Merlin, too, has been seen at the Fens. Whatever the birder's level of skill, time spent exploring this park will be amply rewarded.

For those whose interests are more catholic, fishes, amphibians, reptiles, and mammals galore abound here. For a free comprehensive checklist write to the Center for Vertebrate Studies, Department of Biology, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115.

This article has touched on the highlights of Boston's in-town avifauna. Rather than go into excessive detail (and risk spoiling the thrill of discovery that awaits the reader who decides to study the area in person), I have purposely kept the survey short in length, broad in scope, and vague in a great many particulars. I hope the reader will now want to go out and get better acquainted with a very attractive part of Boston and its equally attractive wildlife. Good birding!

KENNETH HUDSON has been a naturalist and birder for many years. After moving to Boston twenty years ago, he became seriously interested in the urban habitat. He has written several reports and articles on Boston's birds, including "Birding the Muddy River" in *Bird Observer* (volume 13, number 1, February 1985). Mr. Hudson's wildlife photographs have been exhibited at various institutions in Boston, and his slide programs have been well received by senior citizens in the Back Bay area.



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